

Popular Culture and Music in India

Ashok Da Ranade

(Published in Sangeet Kala Vihar – Jana Sangeet Visheshank, Edi. Dr Ashok Da Ranade,
Dec 2000 – Jan 2001)

Few concepts have attracted Indian culture thinkers in recent years as the concept of popular culture.

One of the reasons might be that on account of the inherent inter-disciplinary nature the content of the concept borders on the amorphous. The very fact of a poorly defined content offers opportunities to interpretative freedom with an unrivalled scope.

However, in the context of music, the concept of popular culture becomes really challenging. This is so because our increased understanding of the performing arts (as distinguished from the fine and composite arts) has almost compelled us to degroove our cultural criticism and primarily achieve its disentanglement from literature-heavy conceptual structures, the task is only seemingly easy because one of the chief features of popular culture is print-dominance, and in its wake follows the bias of literature.

Added to these conceptual problems, we also have to contend with the taxing claims of Indian musical situation. With its two systems of art-music, at least fifteen sets of folk-music - tribal groups remaining largely unexplored - the sheer variety assumes a forbidding magnitude. Popular culture or its influences have touched the aforementioned musical expressions in varying degrees and this makes it difficult to generalize.

India is today an amalgam of simultaneous processes, operative in all areas of corporate life. For example, as a nation, India is near industrialised. In more and more walks of life India is making steady movement towards secularisation. Indications of political polarisation too are not missing, and examined culturally, India is poised for a serious confrontation with the occidental.

Hence even a cursory exploration of a phenomenon claimed to be a symptom of modernity is bound to reward us with insights into paces of cultural development relevant not only to India but to the Third world taken as a whole. It is on this background that popular culture can be defined afresh.

Popular culture is a surface behaviour of cultural forces discernible in a society which is only partly responsible to aesthetic stimuli. The said responses are partial mainly because of three factors; Impact of mass-media, repercussions of change in patronage and an interrupted or intermittent operation of commercial and religious pressures.

In India, popular culture needs serious study because its cumulative manifestations have been instrumental in highlighting a number of conflicts; between the oral and the print-culture, between tendencies of assimilation and confrontation with alien cultures, and finally between the tendency to accentuate or to play down the contradictions existing between the theory and the practice of music. Pending adequate area-studies and sufficient field-work, it is inescapable to start the discussion by examining the impact popular culture has on the established categories of music in India, namely, art-music, folk-music and popular-music. Tribal music needs to be left out because data on this category is woefully negligible.

Art Music

According to the accepted usage in India the term 'classical' will signify art-music. However, the chronological and the art-historical overtones of the term 'classical' are likely to overshadow the aesthetico-musicological shades; hence it is deemed advisable to replace the term 'classical' by the term 'art-music'. By using it in this manner we do not imply that the other varieties of musical expression are to be treated as automatically aesthetic failures. It is only suggested that art-music is the type of music which is the least functional, avowedly the least commercial and intention wise the most artistic of all the music-varieties. For all practical purposes Indian art-music is equated with *raga*-music. Some of the principal ways in which art-music is affected by popular culture are discussed here.

Time shrinkage

A very noticeable effect has been the shortening of the time musician now require to unfold their musical ideas as well as for their presentation. A similar shortening is also detected in what the listeners accept as the legitimate, allowable duration desired by the artists to successfully realize their musical designs.

It is commonly known that both theoretically and customarily, concerts of Indian music and individual items performed therein, are of indefinite duration due to

the employment of improvisation and such other similar procedures. The traditional whole-night concerts and single raga presentations of long duration (e.g., more than one hour, etc.) are frequently cited as instances of stretchability and indefiniteness in Indian music. It can however be argued that these features indicate how music used to be in the near past. The contemporary concert duration has shrunk to less than three hours. There are of course festivals which still boast, of all-night music, but the attendance is either poor or selective, selective also in the sense that listeners select the artist they would like to hear. For other artists the listeners are not available or they turn out to be inattentive, passive receivers. It is worth noting that Indian musicians touring the West and performing for western audiences have effected further curtailment in the concert duration which seems to have stabilized around ninety minutes.

A similar time-shrinkage is also seen in the broadcasting of music. From its inception in India in 1927, broadcasting has been a major mass medium that has propagated art-music. It is reported that the art-musicians of the early era used to complain about the short duration allowed for their performances. However, apart from the National Programme of Music (and items of similar nature) all music-programmes broadcasted from the All India Radio (A.I.R.) are today confined to a thirty minute span. Musicians and listeners seems to have adapted themselves to the time-shrinkage. In fact, the occasional grumblings heard in this respect need to be treated as voices from the past. How is one to explain the docile acceptance of the time-shrinkage?

In this context it is necessary to note that temporality is an absolute prerequisite for music. Not only that music takes place in time but music is realised as music mainly because it manipulates the time-dimension. The fact that clock time-shrinkage has become possible in case of Indian music can only mean either of two things; time-shrinkage has not affected Indian art-music; or, alternatively, it has affected it so deeply that profound qualitative changes are brought about. If we accept the first position, the conventional music-presentations appear full of superfluities. Acceptance of the second possibility means that a radical alteration has taken place in Indian-music. By any standard, the time-shrinkage that has taken place is drastic; it has affected all aspects like the repertoire, presentation-method and the overall aim of music-making.

However, the effect of time-shrinkage on art-music could be better explained only after we take note of a little movement to the contrary in another music-related mass-medium - the gramophone. The medium arrived in India in 1898; by 1921 recordings of art-music, came into circulation large way. As is known, the duration of the discs has been continuously on the increase. Today with the unlimited use of magnetic tapes and cassettes, there seems to be no difficulty in recording items of fuller

lengths. Yet, in spite of the technical possibility and practical feasibility of recording extended musical expression, the actual recorded durations are being stabilized around the average span of thirty to forty minutes per single item. In other words, irrespective of some movement in the opposite direction, the overall tendency towards the phenomenon of time-shrinkage is confirmed.

The causal explanation of the time-shrinkage and the accompanying change in the character of Indian music is not far to seek. Along with other factors that have characterized modern life, the collective impact of the mass media has led to a predominance of the element of composing in Indian music. The term 'to compose' must be rightly understood in this connection. In the present context it means predetermined detailed and a prior decision vis-a-vis the content of music presented in a performance. Interpreted in this manner; composing is in direct contrast with improvisation - an element which is specially associated with Indian art-music. Art musicians involved in the modern situation are anxious about the success they are able to achieve by emerging as 'effective' musicians in the limited time-span assigned to them - whether in broadcasting, telecasting, recording or while participating in music conferences, etc. This has compelled them to lay aside the traditional mode of elaborating their music. The traditional-mode of musical elaboration requires that the successive musical patterns and the corresponding musical mood-responses be conceived, executed and received respectively while the artist is engaged in the process of music-making.

What is happening today is quite a different story. In place of the fascinating process of 'composing while performing' the present day musician tends to take up and pursue only those musical structures and strategies which have secured him an 'effect' in the past. Thus he ends up by presenting music which is largely pre-composed rather than improvised. Today we get from a musician a cool and deliberate arrangement of effects instead of a free play of interesting, interacting musical forces initially generated by the artist but which gather their own momentum as music proceeds. The traditional music expression could be truthfully characterised as a 'concert' - a coming together of musical ideas. Now its place is being usurped by a 'recital' - a rendering of what is previously learnt by heart. Memory rather than creativity is being exhibited.

Contemporary Indian musicians are prone to try to eliminate the uncertainties of effect, congenitally bound with music allowed to grow naturally in the traditional mode of musical elaboration. He tends to rely more and more on sure-fire strategies that possess proven capacity to elicit laudatory response from the audience. The copious use of tihaais by Indian musicians today is very symptomatic. Tihaais are

rhythmic triplets which, by their very nature, indicate calculation, pre-setting and definiteness of an expected effect on the audience. Their abundant use suggests an attitude rather than an ability.

The contemporary accent on fast tempo is also explained in the same manner. Fast moving taans patterns in vocal music, jhaala playing on instruments like sitar, sarod, sarangi etc., rela compositions in tabla are all very popular. Firstly because a faster tempo necessarily means a shortening of duration – and this confirms the tendency towards time-shrinkage. But the more important second reason is that the faster tempo communicates a quicker as well as an easily discernible movement towards climactic phases of any musical progression. Fast tempo renderings serve as unambiguous suggestions of identifiable climaxes and function as signal possessing inbuilt answering responses. In a way, they carry out duties of rhetorical questions in music and seem to contain definite indications of proper and legitimate listener responses accepted as such. In this way listeners are guided to socially acceptable group-behaviour. As a result, belonging to a music-oriented group becomes easier. This is the rationale behind the enthusiastic welcome accorded to the tihaais and the fast tempo.

In sum, art-music is no longer allowed to become and remain tantalizingly suggestive - a state of being which requires an extremely alert and a decidedly qualitative contribution from the listeners. With its closely woven, pre-composed texture and the predictable ideational structure, contemporary art-music makes lesser demands on the listeners though it succeeds in eliciting definite and predetermined responses from the audience.

The novel and repetition

Following closely on the heels of time-shrinkage are the existing contradictory pulls of the novel and the repetitions that Indian art-music is subjected to.

The most prominent victim of the tug-of-war has been the raga-repertoire. Due to his deep anxiety to succeed, the contemporary musician either holds fast to the ragas, he has effectively handled before or repeats those he has already recorded on discs, etc. Hence, even though one reads about the mathematically possible thirty-five thousand and odd ragas or hears about a more practicable repertoire off a mature musician (which consists of about two hundred ragas) - not more than fifty seem to be in actual circulation! Resorting to pre-composed music has certainly weakened the risk taking abilities of the Indian musicians. The artists prefer repeating the established and

the accepted to the new and the potentially creative. Instead of looking at every performance as an invitation to innovate they regard it as a fateful occasion endangering their reputation. Igor Stravinsky once ruefully commented that people are happy to recognize than to cognize! Indian musicians seem to have taken to the comment too seriously!

The interesting paradox however is that Indian musicians are also known to luxuriate in an unrestrained indulgence in presenting 'mixed' ragas and new talas - structured on fraction- : based intricacies. The number of vocalists who compose their own cheezs is also multiplying.

Viewed superficially, the situation seems to be full of contradictions. However, a little examination reveals that the situation is otherwise. The opposite and coexisting pulls in connection with the repertoire are only logical consequences of explainable interaction of musical forces. As pointed out earlier, a majority of ragas are repeatedly presented by a number of musicians because their individual musical images have been formed by a consistent inclusion of certain ragas in their respective repertoires. The consequence is that a section of the total raga-corpus is virtually pre-empted as far as other artists are concerned. These latter artists are therefore forced to move out and seek new ragas, etc., in order to create and then to ensure consolidation of their own musical identities. It is obvious that the easiest way out is to present ragas & talas which are describable as rare or exotic! Thus, too many try to win by sheer novelty while a few clutch hard to the accepted and the achieved through sheer repetition!

The specialist and the omnific

The contradictory pulls on the art-musician's repertoire are also reflected in his attitude towards musical forms. Traditionally nurtured Indian musicians used to specialise in some musical form in view of the varying requirements of different musical forms vis-a-vis aptitude, voice, training etc. Versatility was not frowned upon but, at the same time, specialization was not interpreted as a lack of musical richness. Thus a khayal singer who did not sing thumri was not ranked low on that account. In fact, narrower repertoire was understood to be an attempt at concentration which finally led to a more discriminating channelizing of the individual's musical resources.

The contemporary picture is quite different. Musicians of today are more inclined to diversify; unfortunately it can hardly be claimed that the diversification is backed by genuine aesthetic urges and the requisite competence. The truth of the matter

is that the musicians try to handle a variety of forms with a desire to enhance chances of satisfying a larger number of people actuated by differing musical needs.

It is a sad reflection on the musical reality that a musician's inclination towards variety can no longer be easily construed as a prompting of his inner artistic voice struggling to find a proper format conducive to his musical ideas. Musical forms are used today for their supposed efficacy in arousing stock-responses in a large undifferentiated audience exposed to music. It is only on rare occasions that musicians are able to justify their deviation from the earlier patterns of musical specialization. Most of the time they fail to produce proof in support of their attempts to arrogate to themselves powers of unlimited creation.

At this stage it is expedient to relate effects of popular culture discussed here to the definition of popular culture formulated in the beginning.

The time-shrinkage to which art-music is subjected to, is attributable to many factors. In some measure the general pace of communication is responsible for time-shrinkage. The fast pace of communication in general has considerably compressed clock time and this has its effects on the arts which in themselves are special - communications. Apart from the generally increased life pace, the impact of mass media has also contributed to the time-shrinkage as well as to the artist's tendency to prefer pre-composed music to the improvised variety. Media-audiences are heterogeneous and their patronage is indiscriminate in quality. Feedback received from such an audience has compelled the media-administrators to allow non-aesthetic and neo-commercial pressures to play a greater role than is really justified and desirable in the shaping of media-attitudes towards art-music.

Print-culture too has made its share felt in the process. Today song texts, i.e., cheezs are often made available in print; and as a consequence, both musicians and the listeners are more critically aware of the semantic (if not the poetic) dimension of the compositions. An interesting corroboration of the influence of print culture on art-music is seen in the fact that the composers of art-songs are no longer content to remain anonymous or underpublicized. The underlying demand seems to be that an art-song be treated as an equal of lyric in literature, a stage-song in-music-drama and a song-number in films!

The detailed documentation and availability of an exhaustively compiled raga-grammar is also to the credit of print-culture. A greater section of musicians and music-lovers today insist on conformity to the written characteristics of art-music. The natural gap between the practice and the theory of music has become more glaring on

account of the permeating influence of print-culture. It is print-culture which gives teeth to the puritanical adherence to grammar demanded by the scholastic tradition as contrasted with the more accommodative stance of the performing tradition. The latter relies on oral culture which positively discourages definitive versions of music. Today the isolated splendour of the art-musicians and the grand aesthetic abstraction of art-music are confronted with serious challenges. The diversity of pressures acting on art-music have considerably eroded the freedoms usually associated with a strongly non-representational art. Art-musician has to face the music literally! He has to join in the general fray of cultural forces.

However, this does not mean that everything that popular culture has done to art-music is to be decried. Some favourable impact-points can also be mentioned. For example, on account of the underlying motive to pre-compose in order to succeed, the Indian art-musicians have succeeded in getting rid of repetition within a performance. His general approach to music has become more purposeful in respect of design and execution. Irrespective of the musical form involved, musical renderings have certainly become more compact.

Another equally welcome side-effect is the curtailment of the warming up period and mood-initiation procedures which every musician needs to follow. These are no longer thrust on the audiences. The picture of an audience patiently waiting for an artist to warm-up his voice or instrument and to get into the right mood has undergone a radical change. Like a Shakespearean play, today a musician takes a direct plunge in his music. Things have to start happening right from the beginning and the artist's attempt is to avoid all tentative gropings and false starts. The cumulative effect has been to make the beginnings and ends of music easily perceivable; consequently musical structures are more surely erected and easily detected. (In this regard, ethnomusicologists can heave a sigh of relief!) Ostensibly it can also be maintained that the musicians themselves have become more conscious of the concept of form. They are more deliberate and formal in employing musical vocabulary, ideas and forces.

The popular culture has also scored another gain for art-music by bringing about a better appreciation of the timbre-music relationship. Before the advent of the public address systems, audio equipment and the acoustically treated auditoria, musicians used to lavish attention only on two physical dimensions of musical sound; pitch and volume. The third parameter, that of timbre, was almost neglected. Since the arrival of the microphone, 'close-ups' of sounds have become a reality. Musicians have been freed from the elementary worries of being heard over the surrounding noise-level or remaining audible throughout a performance. Thus they are able to devote more

attention to the texture of the sound. In this respect film-music (which forms a very significant component of popular culture) has given a significant lead to art-music. It is barely forty years since Ananda Coomaraswamy averred that a concern for the quality of voice is likely to distract listeners from appreciation of the musical content. He had further argued that Indian musician's indifference to voice-quality is justifiable to that extent! Today this argument will not be put forward seriously. Though vocalists with good voices are as yet a rare commodity, none will be found to deny the relevance of a good, that is, a sweet sounding voice. This is what the regard for the third dimension has achieved. Instrumental music is no exception. Instruments are considered in a new light. Their alterations and modifications are attempted. Contact-mikes and amplifiers are employed and the accent on timbre is unmistakable.

The salutary effects of film-music on art-music is also discernible in one more aspect. Art-musicians are becoming more solicitous about the meaning of the song-texts. Traditional compositions in art-music are too cliché-ridden to be of poetic or literary value. On the other hand, film-music as a genre has heavily depended on digestible, perceivable meanings at poetic content of the same communicable variety. It has also ensured that the music-items are conveyed in a manner which makes an impact. The advantages of this approach have not been lost on art-musicians. They now try to attend to the 'poetic' or the 'literary' dimension of their cheezs. This is amply reflected in compositions of some of the major musicians of the new generation, like Pandit Kumar Gandharva. Indian vocalists are also more emotive in their enunciation of words. This too an indication of the awareness created by the unprecedented following film-music has managed to get and retain.

Folk-Music

Compared to art-music, the folk category of music has been less affected by popular culture in India. The chief reason for the reduced intensity of effect is that this type of music does not have an urban base. India has the vastness of a sub-continent; as yet its rural areas are not effectively opened up by modern means of transport. It is also to be remembered that most of the rural population in India continues to be semi-or-non-literate even today. Further, the linguistic diversity of rural India also contributes to its comparative insulation from the print-based urban and a metropolitan features of popular culture. For all practical purposes, only broadcasting, films (television) have registered some impact on folk-music.

'Produced' Folk-Music

As a result of a very conscious policy decision, broadcasting has made a noticeable impact on folk-music. Soon after independence, the A.I.R. authorities felt the need of attracting greater rural audiences to its programmes. Hence, various stations of the All India Radio were directed to encourage programmes based on regional music(s). In fact, music producers on the staff were instructed to use the idiom of folk-music and compose new songs suitable for broadcasting. This effort to manufacture a special type of music and feed it to the listeners received further support when the A.I.R. started a separate service of variety entertainment programmes and made it available throughout the nation. Instituted in 1957, the service was aptly named *Vividh Bharati* - a fitting tribute to the multi-coloured character of Indian culture. Examined music-wise these efforts seem to have created a musical genre that is heterogeneous by nature and disturbing to the spirit of folk-music. This deliberately created 'folkish' music results in a music which is separated from its natural, psychological and collective matrix. Shorn of its ritualistic and religious adjuncts and spontaneity in expression this music becomes a forced exercise in cultural engineering. It cannot prove appealing to the 'folk' because they have the prototype itself with them. The processed folk-music also fails to attract the musically sophisticated and urbanized listener who is hardly enamoured by the doctrine of authenticity of tunes.

Musically speaking, most of the folk-music is bound to be boring; its power resides chiefly in its collective projection which is by definition ruled out from the broadcast programmes. When folk-music is torn out of the surrounding socket of the communal psyche and the ritualistic aspects, etc., it cannot hope to retain its pull unless it is musically attractive. As a result, the doctrine of authenticity of tunes cannot rescue the produced 'folk' music from its ineffectiveness. In sum, the specially and abundantly churned out folk-music of the A I.R. alienates both the folk and the urbanised listeners from itself (and perhaps from each other at a more subtle level).

Urban models for folk-music

The combinations of A.I.R. and the films have led to another debatable effect of popular culture on folk-music. Indian film makers have always believed in churning out synthetic versions of all folk-manifestation including musical ones. The music-compositions which they turn out are vulgarly saturated with sound, studded with cliché-embellishment, and embedded in grossly imitative orchestration. Their only redeeming feature is a highly polished presentation. Film-music is ideally equipped for

encroaching on the privacy of the individual because it is in a position to provide cheap, instantaneous and readymade entertainment. Its aggressive posture is further strengthened because the far reaching network of the radio and television channels is also available to it. Both these media are loaded with film-music which therefore becomes an ubiquitous phenomenon of incantatory influences. Nothing could have succeeded in making it so offensive culturally than its universality! As a consequence film-music has virtually started dictating programme-models and musical content to folk-musicians themselves! The latter now tend to imitate folkish film-music because they see it so firmly entrenched in the governmental agencies, avidly and approvingly reproduced by the urbanites and lavishly rewarded by all! In music too, bad coins drive out good coins out of circulation.

The neo-professionals

A side effect is becoming discernible gradually but surely. From among the folk-musicians themselves, a new class of professionals is cropping up. Musicians of this class periodically come to the urban centres. For their urban patrons they perform in marriage ceremonies, birthday-parties and similar social occasions. They get well paid (by village standards) and go back richer to their native place. In all probability they cannot be expected to accept the village reality in the same, pre-urban -visit manner. In place of the earlier professionalism, signs of commercialism are seen clearly. Folk music is only one strand of the total fabric of the life in a village-based society. Forcing the pace of change of any single isolated strand or turning it into a commodity is bound to prove disconcerting and destabilizing. It does not bode well for a society that needs a smoother change-over in its essential core; the village life. In addition, the latter has so far always opted for the strategy of assimilation as opposed to that of confrontation. Indian ethos has accomplished the act of assimilation (and not merely of accommodation) because forces that attracted the assimilative processes have not been so far thrust upon it at an artificially stimulated pace.

History instructs us that alien people or other agents serving as carriers of a different cultural content have ultimately become components of Indian society. This picture was radically reframed when the British became more substantially imperialistic (from about 1857 onward). The point is that every planned attempt of bringing about cultural transformation must therefore be combined with a clear understanding of the national temperament. The produced folk-music of the A.I.R. or the commercial film-music that overflows everywhere or the new professional folk-musicians described above, are all symptoms of a cultural drift. To a great extent, cultural forces are

controllable and they can be channelized provided we take hard decisions about our identity.

Displacement of folk-music

Social legislation, print-culture and urbanization of the performing arts (and of music and drama in particular) have combined to produce another subtler impact.

Folk music today provides a good feeding ground for the nostalgia of the city dwellers who are progressively and increasingly cut-off from their village roots. The city dwellers now find it particularly difficult to keep a continued though occasional contact with their village-bases which have been the customary centres of family rituals, religious festivals, etc. Progressive agricultural legislation has discouraged absentee-landlordism as well as the subsistence relationship of the agricultural labourer with the village land. In the past, petty landlords used to have a village seat to supplement their city earnings with the land produce.

Whatever the other consequences that flowed from this pattern, this style certainly allowed them to keep a living contact with village life. In a similar fashion, labourers engaged by such landlords also developed close links with the same land. The situation has now radically changed. The cumulative effect of legislation based on the 'land to the tiller' principle has been to sever the connections of the above class of people with the village. This has developed in them a nostalgia about life in villages in general. This generalized nostalgia seeks an outlet in the urbanized presentations of performing arts. It is not only-surprising that such presentations are debilitatingly and cloyingly sentimental and cliché-ridden. Though it is true that cultural exiles always try to transplant the original cultural vision, it is also true that they rarely succeed. There is one more telling instance of the urban nostalgia. State sponsored shows of folk-arts of the similar incubated variety have also become a regular feature of the city scene. In such shows, items are selected-pruned/modified by the organizing authorities to suit the requirements of the event which is, to all purposes, a staged administrative venture. It is unavoidable that the musical content of such manifestation gets altered. Yet another newly found (and therefore more zealous!) patron of the folk presentations in the tourism industry.

In such shows the performing arts suffer more than the fine arts, because unlike the visually oriented expressions, music, dance and drama are more directly and essentially affected by changes in locale, audience and other performing conditions.

When folk-music becomes only an item to be ticked off by the organizers after a session, it can hardly be expected to be itself.

The city dweller's nostalgia for the folk-expression in a way raises an important question; can- city dwellers have their own root culture? There is an affirmative answer. Such a culture becomes available to those who are total products of the urban areas, not merely city dwellers. Even if this answer is not accepted, displaced and processed folk-presentations are surely not the right culture generating agencies.

Popular music

In a way, discussing popular music while examining popular culture vis-à-vis music might appear pleonastic because popular music is itself an offshoot of the particular culture category under scrutiny. The redundancy can however be avoided by adopting a level different from the one employed while dealing with relationships between popular culture and art-music, etc. Hence, it is to be remembered that to argue about the effects of popular culture on popular music is in actuality to consider the existing relation between a parent concept and a derived one. However, the difference in approach levels does not diminish the utility of the discussion because Indian popular music has as yet not fully realised the potentialities afforded to it by the multifaceted phenomenon of popular culture. In fact Indian popular music draws sustenance from its matrix in such haphazard fashion that it harms the sustainer itself! The truth is that popular music fails to exploit the resources of popular culture which in turn remains · impoverished. As both have to play a mutually supporting roll, their failure to attain their respective statures presents a serious problem of cultural imbalance. To be co-extensive with popular culture in scope and efficacy, popular music in India must do justice to the aspects of media-use, topically and mass-appeal. A brief discussion of the three features may prove useful.

Media dominance

In case of mass-media, the chief damage done to the entire communication process is due to the reversal of the 'user-used' roles in the Indian situation. Firstly, due to various reasons, the print based media are underdeveloped in India. Secondly, there hardly exists any genuine competition among the other media. As a result the films and the radio have become dominant in that order. Under the circumstances, the user (i.e. music in the present case) is dictated to and controlled by the used (i.e. film and radio in this case). In addition, broadcasting and television are government monopolies in India.

The consequences are two fold; there is no competition and the media can afford to be less responsive or indifferent to the audiences. In the absence of the competition the media lack the motivation to do better and as they are in a position to ignore the audience responses, the disapproval or rejection of media-messages by the audiences deprive the media of the urge to examine themselves. As a result both the media fail to do justice to the variety, topicality and the finished quality of the popular variety of music. Further, Indian broadcasting and telecasting governmental agencies are backed by censorship powers that are usually exercised with a literary bias which is blind to the power of music to wrest authority from the accompanying word.

In reality, popular culture is expected to be sensitive to the evanescent but real needs of a society at a particular point of time. As even the passing and the temporary have a place in cultural development taken as a whole, the popular strata of cultural life of community are extremely important. To confine culture only on the eternal is to put it in stocks. This is the reason why accepting the legitimacy of the temporary and recognizing its utility is a sure and heartening sign of moving with the items. Indian broadcasting and telecasting can hardly be accused of keeping pace with the times! If one remembers that till recently there was only one gramophone company in India, the crushing power of the monotony of musical soundscape can be easily felt. In this way the media dominate and create a situation where popular music is forced into narrow and repetitious grooves.

Media dominance is also characterized by the overshadowing of broadcasting and telecasting by films, as suggested earlier. Both go the filmy way in their own productions and also dole out film music in large chunks. Both radio and the television do not seem to be keen on having their own individual modes of cultural expression. The result is a type of cultural regimentation. The experience thus conveyed is so narrow in its reach that it kills the appetite of the receiving audience for anything larger and different.

Lacking the topical touch

Due to its very nature, an important and an ever present asset of popular culture is its kinship with the fashionable and the modern. It is in interests of any society to have a popular stratum to its culture because it is a popular sensibility which attends to the immediate cultural needs of the society. Once having accommodated the immediate with the help of the popular sensibility, a society gets breathing time to sift the original from the novel and the significant from the attractive. It must be noted that

it is popular culture that bears the brunt of the untried new, tests it by allowing a temporary acceptance and consequently keeps the whole structure of the societal responses in a state of shock absorbing flexibility. It is clear that everything new that happens in a society may not be culturally significant. But it is also true that the conservative resistance in any society cannot always be trusted to respond to the new according to its merits. The collective mind works slowly and often rigidly over a small span of time and the long term adverse effects of this type are sought to be prevented by-the alert and quick reflexes of popular culture. It is on this background that the topicality of popular music has a positive function to perform which can hardly be delegated to any other genre of music. Without disturbing the steady rhythm of the deeper cultural dynamics, popular music picks up the more superficial musical pulses which also possess a more immediate and widespread appeal. Topical is the need of the hour and the property of having many faces enables music to fulfil the need. Political slogans, electioneering songs, spontaneous collective chants at sports meets, etc., provide opportunities for the incidental, occasional, momentary formulation of music or musical sounds. Regional - variation, peculiar intonations of - various language speakers, all form an important part of the genre under discussion. Even the semi-musical phonating exemplified in exclamations in various parts of the country are to be considered here. The topical in popular music essentially makes it allusive and occasional. Understood in this manner, only the advertisement in jingles display the quality of allusiveness to some extent. It is a pity that the topicality touch should be so scarce in Indian popular music.

Mass-appeal

One thing that popular music has definitely achieved is mass appeal. Film-music (with the help of broadcasting) has reached almost all nooks and corners of the country.

The author, however, feels that the present references to 'appeal' need not be restricted to the fact of reaching a large number of people. Appeal is quality, not a mere statistical quantity.

It is a noteworthy fact that in the existing state of Indian media operation, there is no free play of competitive forces vying with each other to provide better services. It is therefore difficult to conclude that passive, exposure to the fare provided can be constructed as endorsement or approval of its quality. With no alternative available to users it is unfair to interpret the tolerance of the culturally cornered people

as their voting in favour of the quality of music they are inundated with. Therefore the existence of mass appeal cannot perhaps, be deduced in India.

Further, the conception of appeal also connotes reception of music with an inclination to recreate or hum it. Even though routines like humming etc., are aesthetically poor, they are 'real' substitutes to participation in music-making. Of late the tendency is to play film-music (or any music for that matter) on the hi-fi systems and not to hum or create it oneself. In the present, non-aesthetic context even an approximate reproduction is akin to creation if it is prompted by an intention to create. In addition, the loud level at which music is played also suggests an added dehumanization of music. Used in this way, music is reduced to an atmospheric agent which is expected to envelop the hearer by sound or to isolate him from the outside sounds which are not under his control. One more popular way of making music is also worth noting. Groups of singers are formed to give renderings of 'hit' film songs. These are called 'orchestras' and are largely attended. All these are instances of vicarious music-making and all of them underline a trend; a desire to enjoy without participation. In case of such music, mass-appeal is hardly the term to be used; it is only mass-consumption.

In sum, popular culture in India seems to be in a state of weak formulation. Media - the main vehicles of popular culture - are themselves lopsided in development because the full media is not in operation; also because the existing media are explored in an unimaginative manner. Patronage enjoyed by music is changing gradually and popular culture is playing its part in the process. It is also true that culture leaders and media operators are hampered in working out their ideas on account of interference from political and governmental agencies which display no grasp of the overall cultural perspective. In this manner popular culture is not able to function properly. These remarks apply in toto to popular music which forms a significant part of the popular expression taken as a whole.
